Malawi-Zimbabwe twinning programme launches 'Brain Trust'

The Malawi-Zimbabwe Executive Twinning Programme, an innovative new WAN-IFRA project that matches two newspaper groups in Malawi with two newspaper groups in Zimbabwe for a series of exchanges including newspaper study tours, job shadowing and collaboration on business projects, entered a new phase with the launch of the Twinning Programme Brain Trust in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The Brain Trust, which is made up of senior executives from Torstar Corporation, a Canadian media company and its affiliates, was established to complement the ongoing activities of the project by providing ad-hoc counsel to participating newspapers on their business strategy and operations. The members of this voluntary committee were engaged for their specific areas of expertise.

The Canadians conducted the first of a series of virtual consultations with project participants this week on matters relating to digital strategy, online marketing, advertising sales strategy, newsroom organisation, and corporate strategy as part of a two-day event that also featured strategy sessions led by South African experts and a study tour to Ads 24, an online sales agency owned by Media 24.

Strengthening free and independent press

The Malawi-Zimbabwe Executive Twinning Programme provides for the exchange of expertise between newspaper executives from four independent newspaper groups in Malawi and Zimbabwe, with the overall objective of strengthening a free and independent press in the region. The programme adopts a new approach to twinning: rather than matching newspapers from established newspaper markets with those from emerging markets, it pairs newspapers with similar profiles facing comparable challenges. The approach aims to increase the likelihood of identifying viable solutions for business challenges.

"It is no secret that collaboration within the newspaper industry is a core driver of success and growth, and no one understands the particular challenges facing the industry better than newspapers operating in a similar market context," said Larry Kilman, deputy CEO of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA). "Due to the relative isolation within which project participants operate, the opportunity to access a group of impartial experts from outside their markets, to complement existing exchanges, adds critical support to participants."

Participating newspaper groups include Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe, Alpha Media Holdings (Zimbabwe), and Nation Publications Ltd and BNL Times of Malawi.

"The twinning of BNL Times of Malawi and Alpha Media of Zimbabwe is a match made in heaven", said Dr. Tikhala Chibwana, general Mmanager of BNL Times. "The two companies have so much in common that the opportunity to learn from each other is just huge. The programme harnesses the power of learning from peers who can quickly relate to your situation. With the additional support of the Brain Trust, I feel strongly that our chances for success in implementing our strategic business projects will be greatly enhanced."

Members of the Brain Trust include Michael Cooke, editor of *The Toronto Star*, Kate Collins, managing director, Product (Digital), Dean Ostilly, director of Corporate Development, Deborah Hall, WEB2MOBILE founder and managing director and Karen Wang, Olive media sales director. Also part of the Brain Trust Daryl Aitken, president of Dashboard and Chad Borlase, Kolody Inc's creative director.

The twinning programme is part of an ambitious strategic partnership between the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and WAN-IFRA to advance media development and press freedom worldwide. The partnership allows WAN-IFRA to broaden and develop its press freedom and media development activities to support free and financially sustainable media worldwide.

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